

Concept of abhAva in Advaita VedAnta

The word abhAva is used in Advaita VedAnta at several places. It is used in the sense of absence. When x is absent in y, then it is said that there is abhAva of x in y. For e.g. rUpa is absent in vAyu. So, we say there is rUpa-abhAva in vAyu.

Definition of abhAva

Now, what exactly is this abhAva? BhAshyakAra says in TaittirIya BhAshya: -

भावप्रतियोगी ह्यभावः । यथा ह्यभिन्नोऽपि भावो घटपटादिभिर्विशेष्यते भिन्न इव घटभावः पटभाव इति, एवं निर्विशेषोऽप्यभावः क्रियागुणयोगाद्द्रव्यादिवद्विकल्प्यते । न ह्यभाव उत्पलादिवद्विशेषणसहभावी । विशेषणवत्त्वे भाव एव स्यात् । (TaittirIya Upanishad 1.1)

It says - abhAva is counter-positive, i.e. pratiyogI of bhAva. This bhAva is non-different and yet it appears as if different through pot and cloth as pot-bhAva, cloth-bhAva. Similarly, this abhAva also is without any specifics but it is imagined as a dravya through the conjunction of action and qualities. Further, abhAva cannot coexist with adjectives like lotus (blue lotus etc). This is because the very fact of being endowed with adjectives will result in abhAva being bhAva.

This abhAva is nirvishesha. It is like the horns of a hare. BhAshyakAra proves the nirvishesha nature of abhAva - निर्विशेषस्य त्वभावस्य कारणत्वाभ्युपगमे शशविषाणादिभ्योऽप्यङ्कुरादयो जायेरन् ; न चैवं दृश्यते ; यदि पुनरभावस्यापि विशेषोऽभ्युपगम्येत — उत्पलादीनामिव नीलत्वादिः, ततो विशेषवत्त्वादेवाभावस्य भावत्वमुत्पलादिवत्प्रसज्येत ; नाप्यभावः कस्यचिदुत्पत्तिहेतुः स्यात् , अभावत्वादेव, शशविषाणादिवत्. (BSB 2.2.26) Here AchArya gives an anumAna where horns of hare are posited as an example of abhAva.

Such abhAva, which is devoid of all distinctions, is expressed in terms of objects such as pot-abhAva, cloth-abhAva on account of imagined association with pot and cloth. This very fact turns the abhAva, a complete non-entity, into non-abhAva. AchArya gives proof therefor: चतुर्विधानामभावानाम् , घटस्येतेतराभावो घटादन्यो ष्टः — यथा घटाभावः पटादिरेव, न घटस्वरूपमेव । न च घटाभावः सन्पटः अभावात्मकः ; किं तर्हि ? भावरूप एव । एवं घटस्य प्राक्प्रध्वंसात्यन्ताभावानामपि घटादन्यत्वं स्यात् , घटेन व्यपदिश्यमानत्वात् , घटस्येतेतराभाववत् ; तथैव भावात्मकताभावानाम्. (BrihadAraNyaka Upanishad 1.2.1)

The sum and substance of the above is as under: abhAva is a complete non-entity. It is without any distinctions and specifics. However, when used in connection with objects such as pot, cloth, such pot-abhAva, cloth-abhAva are non-abhAva. They are bhAvarUpa. They are substances like pot and cloth.

abhAva is defined technically in advaita-siddhi as: क्वचिदप्युपाधौ सत्त्वेन प्रतीयमानत्वानधिकरणत्वम्. This further means: क्वचिदप्युपाधौ सत्त्वेन प्रतीयमानत्व - किञ्चित् धर्मिनिष्ठं यत् सत्त्वं तेन प्रतीयमानत्वम् and अनधिकरणत्वम् means अयोग्यत्वम्। सत्त्वेन प्रतीयमानत्व means सत्तादात्म्येन प्रतीयमानत्वम्। The meaning of abhAvatva is thus to be the absence of eligibility of appearance as being identified with sat in any locus.

This abhAva when used in conjunction with anything such as pot, table etc becomes non-abhAva as stated in the bhAshya above. It then ‘appears’ and we say - there is pot-abhAva on the floor. Such non-abhAva can still be sublated by bringing a pot and hence is not sat, which is defined as something which has abhAva of sublatability in all three points of time. This sat is also nirvishesha, like abhAva and appears to be different through pot, table as pot-bhAva, table-bhAva etc.

Thus, vishesha is only in non-abhAva which is also non-sat. This is referred as bhAvarUpa or mithyA or anirvachanIya. This is technically defined as - प्रतिपन्नोपाधौ त्रैकालिकनिषेधप्रतियोगित्वं वा मिथ्यात्वम्. It means - स्वप्रकारक धी विशेष्य यः उपाधिः अधिकरणं तन्निष्ठो यः त्रैकालिकनिषेधः अत्यन्ताभावः तस्य प्रतियोगित्वम्। MithyAtvam thus means the counterpositiveness of absolute-abhAva, negation in all three points of time, in the locus which is the noun in the knowledge with the adjective of the impugned entity. In simple words - if there is a knowledge, “this is silver”, then this knowledge has silver as an adjective and ‘this’ as a noun. This ‘this’ is the shell wherein lies the negation of silver in all three points of time. That is to say, there is counter-positiveness of silver in the locus at all points of time. Such a silver is referred to as mithyA.

The nirvishesha abhAva is asat, i.e. क्वचिदप्युपाधौ सत्त्वेन प्रतीयमानत्वानधिकरणत्वम्. The vishesha-abhAva is mithyA, i.e. प्रतिपन्नोपाधौ त्रैकालिकनिषेधप्रतियोगित्वं वा मिथ्यात्वम्. The example of nirvishesha abhAva is the horns of hare. The example of vishesha-abhAva is pot-abhAva, table-abhAva etc.

Types of abhAva

NyAya discusses four types of abhAva. These are prAk-abhAva, pradhvansa-abhAva, anyonya-abhAva and atyanta-abhAva. It has been demonstrated in the bhAshya (BU 1.2.1) that these four abhAva are bhAvarUpa i.e. non-abhAva and non-sat.

Knowledge of abhAva

How do we come to know of vishesha-abhAva? If it is like a table or chair, then it should be known through pramANAs like pratyaksha, anumAna etc. Here, NyAya states that abhAva (in reality vishesha-abhAva) is known through pratyaksha/anumAna whereas MImAmsakAs hold yogyA-anupalabdhi as the sixth pramANa for knowledge of abhAva. VedAnta ParibhAshA echoes the view of MImAmsA.

However, what exactly is the position of Advaita VedAnta here?

Advaita VedAnta does admit of anupalabdhi as a separate pramANa. However, it distinguishes vishesha-abhAva itself. First and foremost, advaita VedAnta states that the vishesha-abhAva can be of only one type and that is atyanta-abhAva. This is due to the sameness of pratiyogI and pratiyogitA-avachchedaka of all four types of vishesha-abhAva. This atyanta-abhAva is of two types - pAramArthika and vyAvahArika. While the pAramArthika atyanta-abhAva is locus-swarUpa, the vyAvahArika atyanta-abhAva does not have the swarUpa of locus. It is a different vastu than locus. This vyAvahArika atyanta-abhAva is known through yogyA-anupalabdhi pramANa. Thus, the pot-abhAva in the floor is a distinct mithyA entity different from floor due to pot-abhAva being vyAvahArika-abhAva, while traikAlika-bAdhyatva-abhAva in Brahman is Brahman itself, being the locus of pAramArthika-abhAva.

Further, the knowledge of vishesha-abhAva cannot arise unless there is prior knowledge of pratiyogI of abhAva. For e.g. unless one knows as to what is a pot, one cannot know 'pot-abhAva'. Here, it needs to be understood that to whichever degrees one understands the avachchedaka of pratiyogitA, to the same degree one understands the abhAva.

For example, one knows Hindi but does not know Russian. He has a newspaper written in Hindi. Now, without knowing Russian language, he can know the abhAva of the Russian language in that newspaper. However, it does not violate the rule of prior knowledge of pratiyogI. This is so, because the person in the impugned scenario is knowing merely “Russian-bhAshA-nishTha-Hindi-bhAshA-bhinnatva-avachchhinna-pratiyogitA-nir Upita-abhAva”. He knows that Russian bhAshA is a bhAshA. And it is different from Hindi. This much prior knowledge of pratiyogI he has. And hence the rule is not violated. The abhAva which he knows is also such abhAva only. Even if he has a paper in which Russian is written, he would not be able to say as to whether there is Russian-bhAshA-abhAva in that paper or not because his knowledge of Russian bhAshA is not qualified by Russian-bhAshA-tva but merely by Hindi-bhAshA-bhinna-tva.

ajnAna as jnAna-abhAva

To posit ajnAna as jnAna-abhAva, one needs to posit its locus i.e. anuyogI as well as pratiyogI. If one says that pratiyogI of ajnAna is jnAna, then to know ajnAna, one has to know jnAna. By that requirement itself, the knowledge of ajnAna becomes impossible as the person will have jnAna.

Further, where would that jnAna-abhAva reside? If in jnAna, then it would lead to an absurd conclusion that jnAna-abhAva is located in jnAna.

Further, whether this ajnAna is jnAna-prAk-abhAva, jnAna-anyonya-abhAva, jnAna-pradhvamsa-abhAva, jnAna-atyanta-abhAva, jnAna-sAmAnyA-abhAva, jnAna-vishesha-abhAva or sarva-jnAna-abhAva?

ajnAna cannot be jnAna-prAk-abhAva as prAk-abhAva cannot coexist with pratiyogI whereas ajnAna is seen to exist with the jnAna in the form of knowledge ‘I don’t know’.

On account of the same reason, i.e. inability to coexist with pratiyogI, ajnAna cannot be jnAna-pradhvamsa-abhAva either.

ajnAna cannot be jnAna-anonya-abhAva as there would then arise the occasion of ajnAna being located in a pot etc.

jnAna-atyanta-abhAva can be either jnAna-sAmAnyA-abhAva or jnAna-vishesha-abhAva or sarva-jnAna-abhAva.

ajnAna cannot be jnAna-sAmAnyA-abhAva i.e. it cannot ($\sim J1$ & $\sim J2$ & $\sim J3$... $\sim Jn$) as this would imply impossibility of ajnAna when either of the jnAna is present which is not what is experienced. Further, it implies that knowledge of ajnAna would require previous knowledge of all jnAna, which is an impossibility.

ajnAna cannot be jnAna-vishesha-abhAva i.e. say $\sim J6$. Because, ajnAna is seen to persist even if $J6$ is present. It cannot be held that ajnAna is Brahma-jnAna-abhAva, as then the knowledge of ajnAna would require prior knowledge of Brahma-jnAna, being the pratiyogI, which would vitiate the ajnAna itself.

ajnAna cannot be sarva-jnAna-abhAva i.e. $\sim(J1 \text{ \& } J2 \text{ \& } J3 \text{ \&.... } Jn)$ as it would require prior knowledge of all jnAna, which is an impossibility.

Thus, ajnAna cannot be jnAna-abhAva. It is rather non-abhAva. It is not sat either because it is sublated by jnAna. Hence, ajnAna is mithyA. It fulfils the criterion - प्रतिपन्नोपाधौ त्रैकालिकनिषेधप्रतियोगित्वं वा मिथ्यात्वम्. Hence, ajnAna is anirvachnIya, sat-asat-vilakshaNa, mithyA etc.